

## **Op-ed submission**

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### **Boosting investments in quality ECE would fill unmet need and promise high ROI**

In Kiwanis, we rely on a core set of principles as we serve our communities and the world. The nice thing about principles, of course, is that they provide guidance when we're faced with tough choices.

These days, the most difficult choices have to do with spending our scarce resources – not just our money, but our manpower and time, as well. Where do we put them to assure the highest value in return?

When we overlay two Kiwanis principles over the drive for high-quality early childhood education, we have a perfect match. Kiwanis promotes citizenship, and good citizens emerge from good schooling. Kiwanis also seeks righteousness, justice, patriotism, and goodwill – and high-quality early childhood education helps young children enter school ready to learn, achieve academically, and grow up to function as fully contributing members of society.

PA District Kiwanis International is a leader in assuring the strength of Pennsylvania's early childhood education system. Our members volunteer in child care facilities and preschools. Local clubs help early learning facilities adopt high-quality practices. The PA Kiwanis printed and is distributing 70,000 resource guides to teams in the Pennsylvania Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN), helping families and communities engage with high-quality early learning.

At Kiwanis, young children are priority one, and quality early childhood education is a critical component of their growth and development. When we talk about making choices as a society, high-quality early childhood education is one of the best investments we can make. Every dollar invested generates more than \$2 in local spending immediately, and savings of up to \$16 long-term.

Children who experience high-quality early childhood education build a strong foundation of learning and social skills, making them more likely to do well in school, avoid the need for remediation and special education, and graduate. As adults, they are likelier to pursue higher education, earn more, and contribute more in taxes. Clearly, the evidence shows that there are few areas where we can get a better return for our spending.

The flip side is a sadder song. At-risk children who don't get quality early learning are likelier to trail in school and need costly remediation. If they're still reading below grade level by fourth grade, they probably will not graduate. They are likelier to use alcohol and drugs, engage in criminal behavior, and rely on public assistance.

As a state, we shouldn't be pleased about spending \$2.2 billion a year to house and feed prisoners but \$750 million on quality early learning, especially when we know the benefits of upfront investments. We can't be satisfied until that equation is turned around – until there are fewer prisoners, and more children staying out of prison because we invested in their early learning.

President Obama has proposed a groundbreaking investment in high-quality early learning, including a \$1.3 billion federal investment in 2014, plus state matching funds, to expand high-quality preschool, beginning with low- and moderate-income 3- and 4-year-olds. The proposal would also expand high-quality opportunities in child care and evidence-based home visiting services.

The impact in Pennsylvania could help fill a huge unmet need. Only 28 percent of Pennsylvania 3- and 4-year olds from families with incomes under 300 percent of poverty have access to high-quality prekindergarten. Pennsylvania dropped from 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> among states in the percentage of 4-year-olds participating in state prekindergarten programs in 2012. More than 8,000 children are on the waiting list for subsidized child care, only 20 percent of children in subsidized child care are in proven high-quality programs, and only 5,000 of an estimated 19,000 eligible mothers receive the quality support available through Nurse Family Partnership.

Infusing resources into high-quality early learning could be the turning point – the place where we finally start to spend less on prisons and more on the potential of our young children.

*Kevin Thomas is Executive Director, PA District Kiwanis International.*